

Soviet Doubletalk

The Washi *By Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson* Go-Round

THE WASHINGTON POST

Wednesday, Jan. 3, 1968

B11

Soviet Doubletalk Confused Nasser

By Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson

The most amazing story of last June's Israeli-Arab war has just been disclosed. It comes from highly secret intelligence sources, and tells how the Russians played a double game with Egypt's dictator Nasser. The reliability of the story is beyond dispute.

Throughout the crisis, U.S. intelligence kept picking up contradictory reports, some saying the Russians were secretly encouraging Nasser, others claiming they were trying to restrain him.

It has now been learned, incredibly, that both reports were true. Inside fact is that Nasser had two pipelines into the Kremlin and was getting contradictory messages. Through the diplomatic channel, he received urgent Russian appeals to avoid war with Israel. The Soviet Ambassador actually called upon Nasser several times to hand him these appeals in person.

But Cairo and Moscow were also linked by the Russian KGB intelligence channel, which operates independently of Moscow's Foreign Office just as the CIA operates independent of the State Department.

Both the Russians and the Egyptians, sharing a predilection for secrecy, tended to place more reliance upon the

secret KGB channel than upon normal diplomacy.

On May 13, Nasser informed the Russians, via the KGB, of his desire to concentrate his forces in the Sinai, to demand the removal of U.N. troops along the border and to close the Tiran Strait—moves clearly calculated to bring Israel to the brink of war.

Two days later, through the same KGB channel, Nasser received word that the Soviet Union agreed to his moves.

Nasser Is Nervous

But Nasser was nervous over a confrontation with Israel. He wanted more specific assurances, so fired two questions to the Kremlin through the KGB:

1—How did the U.S.S.R. estimate the consequences of an Arab-Israeli war?

2—How far would the U.S.S.R. support the Arabs in the event of such a war?

The Soviet reply to these questions arrived, again through the KGB channel, on May 21. Sallah Nasser, the Egyptian intelligence chief, personally delivered the message to dictator Nasser. It declared:

1. The U.S.S.R. estimate was that the Arabs had the military strength to conduct a prolonged war which eventually would force Israel to make territorial concessions in the Negev and perhaps give up the port of Elat. This would

resolve the question of navigation through the Strait of Tiran.

2. The U.S.S.R. would undertake to prevent U.S. intervention in Israel's behalf.

3. The U.S.S.R. did not foresee any military requirement for its intervention on the Arab side. Should unexpected circumstances arise, however, Egypt could count on immediate and massive Soviet assistance.

Thus, encouraged, Nasser went ahead with his plan to close the Strait of Tiran, which he fully expected to lead to war.

He had moments of hesitation, however, because of the Soviet Ambassador's appeals for restraint. The contradiction in communications also led to a backstage debate inside the Egyptian hierarchy over which Soviet messages to believe.

Wait for Israel Attack

Nasser finally concluded that the KGB channel carried the Kremlin's true, secret attitude and that the diplomatic messages were merely intended as camouflage "for the sake of history." He also figured that the intensity of the Soviet Ambassador's appeals must mean that the Russians didn't want the Arabs to appear to be the aggressor.

Therefore, Nasser calculated that the Russians wanted him to wait for Israel to attack first.

On this point, he was vigorously opposed by Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, who was suspicious of the Soviet doubletalk. In any event, he believed the Arabs should attack first.

Nasser's decision to wait not only led to a military debacle but brought a demand from the Egyptian War Minister, Shams Badran, for a thorough investigation into the political developments that precipitated the war. Specifically, he called for an inquiry into all the communications received through the KGB channel.

There followed a bitter struggle over whose head should roll—that of Field Marshal Amer, who had mistrusted the KGB message, or intelligence chief Sallah Nasser's, who had believed them. The intelligence chief, though clearly wrong, was able to muster the most political power. Amer and Badran were dismissed.

All this so distressed Amer, an Egyptian patriot, that he suffered spells of suicidal depression. It is known that Egyptian intelligence smuggled poison into Amer's prison cell. It's reported that Sallah Nasser, aware of Amer's suicidal tendencies and wishing to silence him, arranged for the poison to reach his hands.

Dictator Nasser, who had no wish for his old friend Amer to die, has now arrested Sallah Nasser.

© 1968, Bell-McClure Syndicate, Inc.